

# The County Administration Center: 1963-Present

## The Civic Center becomes the CAC

County offices occupied the northern side of the Civic Center building upon its completion, and the City offices took up residence in the southern side of the building. Soon the space issue that had plagued governmental offices for so long prior to the completion of the Civic Center resurfaced in the new building. During the 1950s, new municipal and County programs created this need for more space. The City and County began building or renting additional facilities including the courthouse annex, the county operation center and two welfare district offices. Concerned that the disorder of the early 20th century was recurring, administrators authorized a study to determine the severity of the need for more space. A report prepared by the Joint Committee on City-County Office Space declared that the Civic Center was too small; it recommended that the City consider relocating its offices. The County Chief Administrator agreed with the recommendation, adding that the City's need was more immediate than the County's.

In 1962, two appraisers were hired to determine the value of the Civic Center. The findings were used to determine how much the County should pay the City for its share of the building. One year later, the City and County entered into an agreement to convey the City's remaining interest in the property to the County.

The original 1929 legislative grant conveying the Civic Center property to both the City and County had been amended twice for essentially the same purpose: to authorize either the City or County to convey to the other its interest in the property.<sup>61</sup> An amendment in 1961 cleared the way for selling the property to the County. The original appraisal of \$7 million was lowered to an actual purchase price of \$3.3 million, and signing of the agreements took place on July 17, 1963. Speaking to Mayor Charles C. Dail after the signing took place,



San Diego Historical Society

*Dave Bird, Mayor Charles Dail, Supervisor Bob Cozens and Dan Rossi participated in the signing of the agreement that turned over ownership of the building and property to the County.*



San Diego Historical Society

*City worker Darlee Hassmann packs for the move to the Community Concourse.*

Chairman Robert C. Cozens of the Board of Supervisors quipped "we promise not to evict you until you're packed."<sup>62</sup>

The two parties agreed that the City could lease space as needed, but the need never arose as the City began moving to its new offices at the Community Concourse on November 13, 1964. Three decades after designing the County Administration Center, Samuel Hamill supervised the construction of this \$21 million civic complex.

Following the move, officials renamed the building the "San Diego County Administration Center" (commonly referred to as the CAC) and mounted a new sign over the old inscribed letters above the east entrance which previously read "San Diego City and County Administration Building." After the City's departure, many of the sections of the building that had formerly belonged to the City were closed off for some time, but expanding County offices gradually restored life to the southern side of the building. The County finished payments on the building in 1967.

# Building expansions

Prior to the City's move to the Community Concourse, expansions had been completed in an attempt to alleviate the Civic Center space problem. A Health Center was constructed on the northwest corner of the site in 1958. Many thought it detracted from the beauty of the administration center, as the designers only half-heartedly incorporated elements of the main building's architecture. The Health Center had been intended as a temporary structure, but is still a part of the complex.

The Civic Center was constructed so that the north and south wings could support the weight of an additional floor if the need for such space arose. In 1958, a north wing on the third floor was added for the Board of Supervisors' offices and in 1960 a similar expansion had been undertaken for the mayor's office. After the city's departure from the building in 1964, expansion needs settled down for a time as County offices grew into the City's old office space. Yet in less than a decade the need for more space surfaced again; just six years



County of San Diego

*The County's health building, built in 1958, was meant to be a temporary structure.*



San Diego Historical Society

*Part of the 1974 renovation project included installing an air conditioning system.*

after the city moved out, a third floor was added to the northeast wing of the building in response to a faster-growing county government.

In 1974, the largest expansion ever to take place on the building since its construction was proposed and was slated to take eight years.<sup>63</sup> The County appropriated funds to add 21,000 square feet of additional space to the building. Included among the projects were: third and fourth floor additions and remodeling, southeast and southwest wings added to the third floor to match architecture on the north side, and a cafeteria constructed on the south end of the fourth floor. Office interiors were modernized, lighting was updated, and ventilation was improved. During the midst of this construction other space alternatives were considered for County offices, such as remodeling the Port District headquarters (described as an uninspiring building with no windows), or constructing a new building in the downtown area (where land had become too expensive to justify such a plan). Neither idea was approved, and the remodeling plan continued.

The top four floors of the tower were declared a fire hazard in 1978 because there was only one stairway serving them. Departments occupying the tower relocated to other parts of the main building, as the County did not have the funds to construct a second stairwell to meet fire codes.<sup>64</sup>

After expansions were made to the fullest extent that the building could support, County Administration continued to relocate offices to other parts of the County.

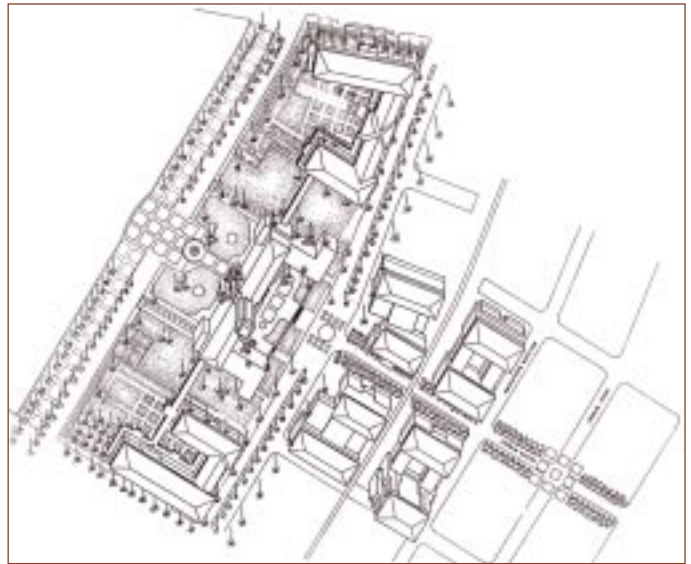
# New considerations for CAC development

With County revenues decreasing and costs of county services increasing, the County of San Diego is facing a fiscal dilemma. In response, the Board of Supervisors proposes to generate additional revenue through more intense utilization of all county properties....One such property is that upon which is located the County Administration Center in downtown San Diego. – Donald L. Clark, County Counsel, 1981.<sup>65</sup>

During the 1980s, discussions arose to open up CAC land for commercial leasing. Since the property was declared free from the tidelands trust through 1929 legislation, and the only limitation imposed on the property was that it be used for County purposes, some County officials believed that generating revenue from leasing the property would be considered a County purpose. The Board of Supervisors decided to review the possibility of building hotels on the more than nine acres of parking lots attached to the County Administration Center.

A task force began considering development plans for the parking lots on either side of the County Administration Center. One member brought up the idea of leveling the entire complex, claiming that it was “terribly inefficient” and “functionally obsolete.” The task force reviewed proposals to build high-rise hotels, shops, condominiums, and offices on the parking lots; models were constructed and displayed for the public to view. The Board was persuaded to scrap the proposal in 1985, with arguments that it failed to provide enough open space and would overwhelm the County building.

In the wake of the failure to develop the site commercially, the Board of Supervisors revived the idea of creating the Cedar Street Mall. The foundation for this idea had been part of the Nolen Plan, which suggested a complex of government



County of San Diego

*A 1988 proposal included reviving the Cedar Street Mall idea from the Nolen plan.*

buildings and parks extending from San Diego Bay to Balboa Park. Supervisor Brian Bilbray suggested the Cedar Street Mall at a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the Civic Center; he urged the City of San Diego to develop new offices next door to the CAC to replace what had already become an undersized City Hall.

A 1988 County-commissioned report written by urban designer Gerald Gast and architect Daniel Hillmer urged development of a government and office complex near the County Administration Center, which would enlarge space for both City and County offices. The proposed development encompassed a minimum of four blocks immediately east of the County Administration Center, with CAC parking lots developed into three and four story County office buildings linked by courtyards. The proposed plan would have cost about \$132 million if it had been approved, yet like many other development aspirations, it did not receive the necessary backing.<sup>66</sup> San Diego Mayor Maureen O'Connor and other city officials presented yet another idea; they wanted the County to team up with the City for a new civic center on another site. If this move had been completed, the mayor suggested that the CAC could be turned into a museum.<sup>67</sup>

Proposals came and went, yet the Civic Center itself remained virtually untouched.



County of San Diego

*An architect's rendering of a 1984 proposed private development of the County's parking lots.*



# Historic Designation of the County Administration Center

Spurred on by the comment that the CAC should have been torn down and replaced with a bigger and more utilitarian edifice, a group of 400 locals known as Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 dedicated themselves to the preservation of the County Administration Center. Catalyzed by the Board proposals to commercially develop the parking lots, they sought to obtain National Historic Site status for the complex. Obtaining historic status would ensure the County Administration Center a higher degree of protection. Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 researched the history of the building and submitted a nomination form to the National Register of Historic Places. While awaiting the federal response, the City Historic Site Board approved the CAC as a historic site on October 22, 1986. Finally, on May 16, 1988, the site received recognition on the national register.

On July 11, 1988, the Board of Supervisors and Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 celebrated the 50th anniversary of the original dedication of the building by President Roosevelt, combined with an observance of the site's placement on the National Register of Historic Places. As part of the ceremony, County Supervisors invited FDR's eldest son, James Roosevelt, to speak on the harborside steps of the CAC. Recalling the original dedication ceremony, James Roosevelt read the inscription "the noblest motive is the public good" just as his father had done 50 years before, adding "this building has served the test of time [with its] public service. I think it can inspire not only us, but those that come afterwards." Roosevelt claimed that his father had spoken very highly of the building, expressing "he was very proud that the WPA could build something like this."<sup>68</sup>



County of San Diego

*James Roosevelt (center), son of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, helped celebrate the 50th anniversary of the building, along with the unveiling of the plaque commemorating its placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Joining Roosevelt are then-Supervisors Susan Golding, Brian Bilbray, George Bailey, Leon Williams and John MacDonald.*



*The County Administration Center was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.*

County of San Diego

# Preparing for the Twenty-First Century

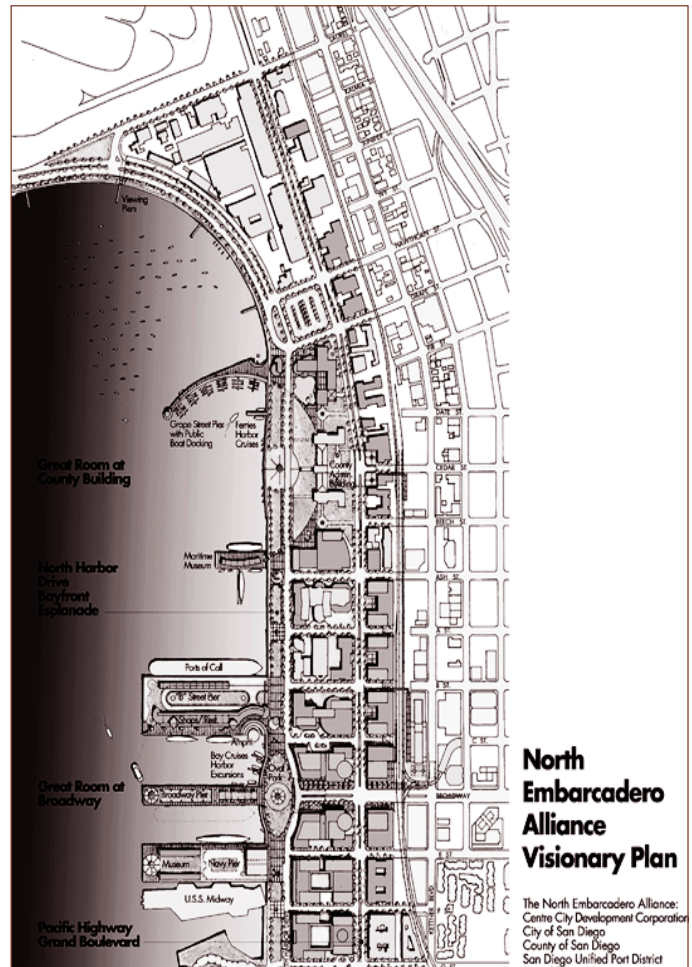
In January 1996, the Board of Supervisors appointed the Clerk of the Board to serve as administrator of the County Administration Center. Major improvements have been made to the building and grounds. The Board approved funding for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) improvements to make the building more accessible, and other infrastructure and retrofit projects have been completed.

In a movement to revitalize San Diego's "front porch" (as the County Administration Center's neighborhood has often been called), the Board joined the North Embarcadero Alliance in 1997. The interagency group is establishing planning standards for the area from Laurel Street/Lindbergh Airport at the north to G Street/Seaport Village at the south, and from the harbor at the west to the railroad at the east. The County Administration Center and the surrounding property are at the core of this planning process.

Also in 1997, the Clerk of the Board established a tower task force to review building and historical codes. This task force brought forward the recommendation to re-open the County Administration Center's tower, which had been closed 20 years earlier. On January 27, 1998, Supervisor Greg Cox delivered the Chairman's State of the County address, stating:

On February 10, our Board will prioritize capital projects, and allocate the proceeds from the sale of our trash system. High on my list is the renovation of our historic County Administration Center of Pacific Highway. Sixty years ago this year, President Franklin Roosevelt dedicated what remains today the most distinguished public building in the region. It is the centerpiece of the North Embarcadero, an area considered by many to be San Diego's "front porch." It is a beautiful waterfront landmark that deserves restoration, preservation and full accessibility to the people of our County. I will ask my colleagues to support a major renovation of this jewel on the harbor, and reopen the tower, which has been off limits for years. It's an integral part of our North Embarcadero planning effort, a unique collaboration between the County, the City of San Diego, the Centre City Development Corporation, the Port and the Navy to revitalize one of the finest pieces of real estate in California.

The Board allocated \$3 million for restoration of the tower, repair of the red tile roof, and repairs and painting of the exterior.



Sasaki Associates, Inc.



Sasaki Associates, Inc.

*The North Embarcadero plan aims to revitalize San Diego's "front porch."*



# Celebrating 60 Years

On July 16, 1998, sixty years to the date, Chairman Greg Cox presided over the rededication ceremony of the historic County Administration Center and commemorated President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's visit. Hundreds of people attended the outdoor event and, under a cloudless sky, were transported back to the 1930s.

Each member of the Board of Supervisors arrived in a vintage automobile, much like President Roosevelt had in 1938. They mingled and shook hands with the crowd as patriotic music played while they made their way to the stage. A vintage car show featuring vehicles from the 1930s turned the parking lot into a showcase. San Diego's Big Band Music Makers kept toes tapping before and after the official program, and the dancing Parasol Strutters brought smiles to everyone in the crowd.

The program began with the presentation of the colors by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department and 14-year-old Jessica Kloor's rendition of the "Star-Spangled Banner."



County of San Diego

*Supervisors Dianne Jacob, Pam Slater, Greg Cox and Bill Horn participate in the ceremonial ribbon cutting at the 60th anniversary celebration.*



County of San Diego

*The County Administration Center was adorned in flags for the festivities.*

The international-award winning barbershop quart, Revival, performed a gospel medley and the crowd-pleasing "Sittin' on Top of the World." The County's own Assistant Chief Administrative Officer, Walt Ekard, also led the audience in "God Bless America." Former County Supervisor Roger Hedgecock, now a radio talk show host in San Diego, was on hand to broadcast his show live from the CAC and interview members of the Board and other county officials.

Several San Diegans who attended Roosevelt's dedication or worked in the building during 1938 were also honored, including one man who, as a young boy, came with his father to witness Roosevelt's visit. Another attendee had been a member of the Marine Band that performed at the 1938 dedication; at the rededication he performed again, this time with the Music Makers.

Each member of the Board of Supervisors shared his or her vision for the future before cutting the red ribbon to officially rededicate the County Administration Center.

Vice Chairwoman Pam Slater noted: "This building—a legacy of our past—will remain the legacy of our future. All of us here today will continue to dream and to build with the same confidence and optimism as the men and women who placed the bricks and mortars on the foundation of our future here at the County Administration Center."

Supervisor Dianne Jacob highlighted the fact that "many individuals—from County employees to local historians—have preserved the County Administration Center for the present and future."

Supervisor Ron Roberts remarked that the preservation of the historic County Administration Center represents our commitment to restoring the aesthetic value of public buildings. The County Administration Center reflects the richness and diversity of San Diego's architecture, and is the centerpiece of the unparalleled San Diego skyline.

Supervisor Bill Horn reminded the audience of the importance of agriculture to the San Diego economy, and the planting of victory gardens on the CAC's grounds. He noted that the "building and its grounds symbolize the rich and diverse cultural heritage of our region."

The ceremony also officially kicked off the \$3 million renovation of the County Administration Center. In February 1998, the Board of Supervisors unanimously supported Chairman Cox's proposal to replace the original red tile roof and re-paint the building. Additionally, floors six, seven and eight of the tower will be made accessible to the public. No County employees' offices will be located in the tower, as some were prior to 1960, when previous San Diego mayors had their office on the eighth floor. Instead, the tower may include a library and/or historic museum, public reception area and meeting spaces.

As Chairman Cox noted in his remarks at the ceremony: "Because of the vision and drive of those San Diegans who preceded us more than a half century ago, we have this



County of San Diego

*Among those celebrating the 60th anniversary were Ailene Smith (front row, center) who worked for the County when the building opened in 1938, and Max Morgan (front row, right) who was a courier for Western Union at Roosevelt's dedication visit.*

wonderful jewel on the bay. Let their story inspire in each of us the ability to look beyond the present and into the future...and let us build a better city and a better region for our children and for our children's children in the days and years to come."



County of San Diego

*Hundreds of people turned out to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the building.*